

# Culture and Schools: American Indian Stakeholder Perspectives on the American Indian Student Achievement Gap

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## Introduction

On a biennial basis, the Montana Office of Public Instruction produces a report on the gap in American Indian student achievement for the upcoming legislative session. This report includes state data on graduation, dropouts, and assessments for American Indian students and their non-native peers. This year, in an effort to expand the conversation, the OPI's American Indian Student Achievement (AISA) team and the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) research team are collaborating to explore local community and education stakeholder perceptions about the achievement gap. The project includes exploratory focus groups, a statewide survey, and interviews with indigenous scholars. This document provides a summary of findings for the focus group phase of the project, initial recommendations, and outlines next steps for the project.

## Project Vision

### Project Purpose and Design

This report and the full technical report (available upon request from the OPI) represent one phase in the three-phase project. The overall goal of the project is to answer the following question:

**In Montana schools and communities, what factors influence the  
American Indian student achievement gap?**

While the quantitative achievement gap report produced every two years provides data regarding the degree of the achievement gap and specific metrics describing the gap (the 'WHAT'), it does not provide tangible information as to causal factors (the 'WHY'). In order to begin exploring the 'why' aspect of the achievement gap, the focus group phase of the project seeks to answer several sub-questions:

1. *Which factors do education stakeholders believe are the driving factors in the achievement gap?*
2. *Do those factors vary for students who attend school on-reservation versus those who attend off-reservation?*



### 3. *Where do education stakeholders believe impact can be made to close the achievement gap?*

By answering these questions, the American Indian Student Achievement unit at the OPI hopes to expand on the achievement gap report by providing insights directly from the communities where these children are being educated. By combining data on achievement with the lived experiences of students, teachers, school leaders, community elders, and other education stakeholders, we can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the gap and work together to respond to those driving factors.

## **Methods**

### *Design and Sampling*

Because this is the first large-scale qualitative study on this topic conducted by the OPI, our first task was to ask a broad series of questions to gain an understanding of the perceptions of American Indian communities and the stakeholders engaged in education for American Indian students. We approached the project without a specific theoretical frame in order to minimize assumptions and any potential associated biases. We developed a focus group questionnaire and recruited participants from across the state in the following roles: teachers, school leaders, boards of trustees, community members and parents, students, and former students.

We sought participants from across the state, including participation from both on-reservation individuals and those from off-reservation communities who serve large populations of American Indian students. Schools were selected to participate based on school size, location, and other factors geared toward building representativeness in the dataset. Overall, we recruited 42 participants from 15 different communities who participated in ten focus groups.<sup>1</sup>

### *Sampling limitations*

During participant recruitment, we encountered some challenges. For some schools, capacity for participation in anything other than direct support for students was not feasible during Coronavirus shutdowns. Additionally, some districts who were invited to participate chose to decline the invitation. While these factors may have limited us from achieving our ideal dataset, this initial phase of the project never had the aim of being fully representative— particularly due to the high volume of data that results from focus groups. Rather, this first phase was an exploratory effort to determine which factors impacting the achievement gap should be the focus of phase two— our forthcoming survey.

### *Focus Group Processes*

For the safety of all participants, and in accordance with travel prohibitions from the state, all focus groups were conducted and recorded via the video-conferencing platform Zoom. The

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<sup>1</sup> Role and location-based data are available in the methodology section of the full technical report. To request a copy of the report, please contact Joan Franke at [jfranke@mt.gov](mailto:jfranke@mt.gov).  
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– Summary Brief



**Table 1: Categories of themes**

	<b>Frequency</b>
Culture and the Family	780
Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Instruction	539
School System	441
Student Learning	709
Trauma and Student Identity	409
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,878</b>

*Culture and Family*

The data contained many testimonials to the strength and importance of indigenous culture. Participants expressed the importance of culture within the communities and schools and the negative impact of historical suppression of culture. Participants asked for more genuine integration of indigenous culture into education— and expressed disappointment when such inclusion felt superficial or tokenized. The family unit, and in particular the heritage of strong extended family units, was also prominent. Educators and parents alike agreed that strong education advocacy and supports at home translated into better student outcomes at school. Participants also felt that uncertainty and instability, food insecurity, and student mobility due to unsettled home lives had the opposite effect at school. Sentiment about family was mixed, as we observed frequent comments about generational trauma and poverty and their impact on both student well-being and ability to succeed.

*Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Instruction*

Within the dataset, one of the most important observations was the enormous impact of teachers. Participants felt that when teachers took genuine interest in student success and student wellbeing, students excelled. They felt the opposite was also true. When scores and content delivery were prioritized and teachers would not or could not be responsive in their teaching, participants reported poorer student outcomes. Educator bias was a topic of concern. Students and those in other roles outside the classroom expressed frustration that American Indian students were not pushed as hard as non-native peers, and that teacher bias (including implicit bias) was recognized by students and damaging to their sense of self.

A call for more responsive instruction was also present in the data. Trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, and individualization of learning were proposed by those within and outside the school setting. Sentiment in this area was strong, as were the number of comments. Most participants either advocated for or lamented the lack of personalized instruction. This theme also overlapped frequently with participant comments on culture. Some felt the Westernized approach to education was not always an ideal way for American Indian students to learn and that incorporating indigenous ways of knowing would help students and families engage and connect more with schools. Participants applauded immersion programs such as language classes and the use of indigenous knowledge concepts within other classes like math/science. These provided opportunities for students to form positive connections to

their American Indian identity through education, serving to both increase self-esteem for students and provide them with a positive educational experience.

One area where conflicting data emerged was in relation to specific courses or topics. Some participants felt that more emphasis on reading and math were vital and that things like limited reading skills would impact all areas of a student's education. Others felt an over-emphasis on these and suggested ways to make them more relevant to students via more culturally relatable content. They also suggested cutting back on instruction in these areas in order to address other student needs like health and well-being issues which can impact a student's ability to focus, leading to disruptions in academic progress and graduation goals.

Another noteworthy theme in this category was professional development. Participants felt that many of the factors discussed already such as trauma-informed practices, culturally-responsive teaching, Indian Education for All (IEFA), and social-emotional student needs were important. Frustration about professional development was often linked to the external constraints on which offerings could be pursued. This included the need to meet grant requirements, timing, availability, and cost. There were also calls for consistency in professional development and support strategies. This contributed to frustration about always having to learn the next new thing, without time to fully implement and evaluate previous strategies.

### *School System*

There were relatively few comments about the school system (district and schools) aside from the teaching and learning that occurs within these institutions. Other categories in the report elicited much more conversation. Education alternatives, staffing, and student supports were the notable topics within this category.

Much like in the discussions on pedagogy and curricula, participants noted that when the school systems are structured in ways that are not adaptable to student needs, students do not find the same degree of success. Some suggestions from conversations included embracing the HiSET more where appropriate, alternative schooling, career-based learning either on- or off-site, and modifications to graduation requirements to align with state standards rather than being more stringent.

School staffing was an important area of discussion. Participants from both on- and off-reservation expressed challenges recruiting high quality educators. Pay was cited as a barrier, as was the misalignment between pay that could be offered and the expertise needed. One area of the school staffing discussion where sentiment was strong was in relation to American Indian teacher recruitment and retention. Participants noted that the pool of American Indian educators is so small and demand for them is so high. They commented that American Indian educators at schools serve as role models and reinforce a positive cultural identity for students, making them vital for fostering a positive learning environment.

The final theme in this category was student support. This included support from the school system broadly speaking, and comments regarding those in support-specific roles. Sentiment in this category leaned negative and highlighted an overall frustration with what participants perceived as certain gaps in student support or a need for increased support. Some participants

wanted more from school leadership for non-academic supports or more of a prioritization of the non-academic aspects that impact a student's ability to learn. One area where individuals from several different roles commented was the burden on counselors to engage in non-counseling related tasks that limit their time for direct support of students. Things like scheduling and other administrative tasks were seen as barriers to providing mental health support, substance abuse support, and guidance addressing non-academic student needs. Parental mental health needs were also mentioned, as was the impact of parental support on student success.

### *Student Learning*

This category included themes of achievement, attendance, social promotion and graduation, and skills and career. Few comments referenced the achievement gap directly, though participants agreed on the complexity of the achievement gap and that many facets of both school and home life impact student success. Participants made suggestions to emphasize a culture of success by making more concerted and consistent efforts to celebrate incremental successes *with* students to try and build enthusiasm for academic and other types of achievement.

The one area with inconsistent responses was testing. Some participants advocated for interim and practice testing as a means to build testing skills and respond to knowledge gaps and areas of lower performance. Others felt the emphasis on testing was a cause of testing anxiety and the tests presented content in a way that put American Indian students at a disadvantage due to their design. Finally, some advocated for more efforts to illustrate testing importance to students. Examples of this included assuring students receive and understand test results and understand how tests can drive future opportunities. Further inquiry in this area will be important in the next phase of this project.

Attendance was also an area of concern for participants. Some commented that attendance needed to be adaptable and should not be a barrier for students who had missed large amounts of school (for example due to a death in the family) and wanted to return. Others commented on the negative impact of low attendance rates for teachers' ability to make forward progress in curricula and keep classes on track. Some participants noted that policy related to attendance was out of their hands because of state requirements. Almost all agreed, regardless of their role, that attendance was a critical factor in student success.

Another related challenge for schools was social promotion— or advancing students to the next grade before they have achieved proficiency in the current grade. Many participants felt students are being moved ahead before they are ready, and educators are 'kicking the can down the road.' Some participants felt students who were advanced before ready were more likely to drop out because they eventually end up so far behind classmates, they feel hopeless. Early intervention at the elementary level was suggested as a way to temper social promotion and prevent the problem from starting early and compounding year after year.

The last area participants discussed in this category was a focus on next steps beyond K-12. Participants indicated that family perceptions about college and career play a big role in the

way students develop their own expectations about the future. They indicated that on-reservation there is not a strong college-going expectation and that high school graduation is the emphasis. Advocates of higher education amongst participants said early exposure to colleges and information about higher education opportunities has helped and they hope to expand this for more students. Participants also spoke about career training and proposed more career-based education opportunities and an increased focus on Career and Technical Education (CTE). Participants believed some American Indian students value hands-on education more and become more invested in class when they can see the direct relevance and learn through doing rather than in a traditional format. Again, though, the focus was on being more responsive to what would engage the student rather than expecting the student to adapt to an expected learning mode.

### *Trauma and Student Identity*

In this study, comments relating to trauma and mental health have been combined. We chose to pair these two topics because they occurred in the same context, with the same challenges, and with similar proposed solutions throughout the dataset. Identity discussion in the dataset connected both to these topics and to our earlier discussion of cultural relevance.

Trauma was a common topic of discussion. Participants spoke of historical trauma, or trauma with a historic point of origin, and how today the same communities of people face reconciliation and resilience efforts due to its impact. In particular, participants spoke of the negative impact of a dominant culture on their communities and often referenced back to the boarding school experiences of elders and how their traumatic experiences have impacted native perceptions of education. Participants also spoke of generational trauma. This type of trauma also has a historic point of origin serving as a catalyst for cycles of repeated trauma experiences, where point of origin varies by American Indian community. Generational trauma is an ongoing trauma. In particular, participants spoke of trauma related to abuse students experience at home, often tied to drug use. Participants again referred back to the need to invest in counselling and social supports— citing many examples of programs and efforts where that approach has proved effective. Mental health supports for students and addiction support for students and families were also mentioned as factors that could improve student well-being and academic success.

Discussions about identity often centered on the value a positive social identity provided for students. Participants felt that belonging to a tribe and having knowledge of the ways of their peoples help students to have a stronger sense of self. This benefit was compounded if reinforcement of that tribal identity and culture occurred at home. There were challenges stemming from social identities as well for both on- and off-reservation students. Alienation was a theme mentioned from both locations. Participants indicated that students on-reservation feel as though outsiders view American Indians as ‘less than.’ Meanwhile, they said students off-reservation feel as though they did not quite fit into either setting (on- or off-reservation). They do not have the strong tribal identity and daily connection that comes from living on a reservation and are still outsiders or different in their own schools and communities. Participants thought there was a strong role schools could play in tempering explicit bias and

supporting a positive American Indian identity. This was especially important off-reservation, where students may not see positive aspects or celebration of their culture as regularly.

## Location and role variation

The above discussion highlights the main themes that emerged from the study. Data from on- and off-reservation participants was similar in many cases, but some distinctions are worth noting. While we do not yet have enough information to draw any robust conclusions about these, the initial variability points to areas where further inquiry is warranted.

### *On- and off-reservation variation*

One area of discussion where responses varied was in relation to opportunity or lack thereof. On-reservation participants expressed frustration that students had fewer community and career opportunities than their peers off-reservation. Specific areas included parks, theaters, pools, restaurants, and other things to do during off-school hours. The lack of these things on-reservation was seen as contributing to boredom and, subsequently, students getting into more trouble. Alternatively, participants from off-reservation called for more opportunities for American Indian students to connect with their cultural identities. Some off-reservation participants indicated that programs to connect off-reservation students to their cultures had been successful and others expressed a desire for more opportunities for students to learn about kinship values, their ancestry, and the beliefs of their peoples. Other areas of variation where we need to know more include perceptions about graduation and post-secondary study, testing practices and views on testing, poverty, graduation requirements, and the roles and availability of counselors and social and mental health supports. Finally, we need to know more about mobility between on- and off-reservation. Many participants commented on the instability students experience based on living situations and moving back and forth from reservations to nearby, and often more urban off-reservation communities.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings summarized above, the research team found that participant responses about the achievement gap often did not relate to instruction or even in-school factors at all. In total, 60 percent of participant comments related to factors **within** the school they believed contributed to or could help close the achievement gap for American Indian students. Forty percent related to factors **outside the home**. This ratio is telling in itself of the complexity of the achievement gap, but it also speaks to the many areas where action might have impact, and more importantly, where the communities themselves believe actions might have impact. Additionally, the overwhelming theme of the dataset is a call to close not an achievement gap but the opportunity gap that exists for American Indian students. Participants provided insights both on factors that limit opportunities and areas where opportunity can be improved. Overall, we conclude and recommend the following:

- Relatively few comments focused on dropout or achievement. Many comments focused on teaching and learning but did not connect directly. This disconnect needs further examination.



- Cultural relevance that is closest to the student has the greatest impact on- and off-reservation. When students see their culture thriving, less negative identity issues arise. Estrangement from culture may impact dropout. Few cultural ties to testing also lead to a student disconnect with assessments.
- Participants did not discuss school and district-level factors to the same degree as other factors. Some characteristics such as staffing and support systems did receive attention though.
- ***The importance of American Indian educators cannot be downplayed.*** More than mentors and role models, they provide increased relevance for what students are learning through their ability to relate, and from personal experiences. Stakeholders also called for a stronger role of the school counselor and ways to promote social-emotional learning.
- Teachers were viewed positively in this dataset. There is a strong emphasis in the data on teacher training that can focus on dropout and achievement. Many different instructional practices were mentioned. ***Personalized learning*** received extensive discussion to make learning relevant, adaptable, and self-paced.
- Achievement and attendance were two factors leading to dropout. One administrator mentions that achievement tests lose relevance as students advance grades, indicating ***testing fatigue*** or a gap in perceived importance of testing. Stakeholders also mentioned numerous alternatives to schooling whether it be ***an increased focus on CTE, alternative education programs, or alternative graduation requirements.***
- Trauma is interwoven throughout the dataset— ***generational trauma*** originating inside the home and ***historical trauma***. Participants advocated strongly for programs and training targeting trauma.
- ***Helping students develop an identity that is built of a sense of belonging to community and culture improves student well-being.*** Numerous instances where students are described as ‘alienated’ or hopeless suggests that many factors discourage positive identity formation, and, in turn, well-being and academic success.

## Next Steps

While the volume of data from these focus groups provided an enormous amount of information regarding local perceptions about the American Indian student achievement gap, more work is necessary. As with any exploratory project, many questions remain and some new questions have emerged. More information is needed about the difference between on-and off-reservation experiences for American Indian students— both inside and outside the classroom. We also need to better understand perceptions about testing, graduation/dropout, and post-secondary planning. We also need to know more about graduation/attendance/testing requirements at schools that may set the graduation bar higher for some American Indian students. Finally, we need to expand the sample of participants. While we spoke to many communities for this first phase of the project, some communities were underrepresented in our sample. We would like a more geographically representative sample for the next phase of the project as well, so we may examine any potential differences based on region.

Our next steps will include design of a survey based on focus group findings and community feedback, distribution across the state, and further analysis of the data collected. The survey will expand the sample of participants to assure inclusion of perspectives not captured in the initial phase of the project. It will also provide a more focused inquiry into remaining and emergent questions from the focus groups.

*The SLDS research team would like to thank the American Indian Student Achievement team for allowing us to contribute to this project and execute your vision with you. We believe when working together in concert, data and community perspectives can provide valuable insights and actionable information to enhance education for Montana students. –Crystal, Robin, Nicole, and Emma.*

For questions about this project or to read the full technical report, please contact [Lona.RunningWolf@mt.gov](mailto:Lona.RunningWolf@mt.gov).